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## Impact of Burnout and Empathy on Correctional Officers' Aggression

Sagan Ladd  
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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Sagan Ladd

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Walden University

2026

Abstract

Impact of Burnout and Empathy on Correctional Officers' Aggression

by

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MA, Murray State University, 2016

BA, Murray State University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

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## Abstract

Correctional officers experience persistent occupational stress that places them at elevated risk for burnout, which may negatively affect emotional functioning and increase aggression. Guided by general strain theory, this quantitative nonexperimental correlational study examined the relationships between burnout, empathy, and aggression among uniformed correctional officers working in U.S. jails and prisons. Participants ( $N = 58$ ) completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire–Short Form through an anonymous online survey. Simple and multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to answer three research questions. Results indicated that burnout significantly predicted aggression,  $F(1, 56) = 12.38, p < .001, R^2 = .18$ , such that higher burnout was associated with higher aggression scores. Empathy did not significantly predict aggression,  $F(1, 56) = 2.32, p = .133, R^2 = .04$ , though the relationship trended negatively. A multiple regression analysis revealed that burnout and empathy together significantly predicted aggression,  $F(2, 55) = 7.74, p = .001, R^2 = .19$ ; however, burnout remained the only significant predictor when controlling for empathy. Additional analyses indicated that burnout significantly predicted all four facets of aggression: verbal aggression, physical aggression, anger, and hostility. These findings suggest that burnout plays a central role in aggression among correctional officers and highlight the importance of organizational and mental health interventions aimed at reducing burnout to promote staff well-being and institutional safety.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Being a correctional officer comes with a number of significant occupational stressors, including the risk of inmate assault, mandatory overtime, high turnover rate, and exposure to potentially traumatic events (Bishopp et al., 2018; Fusco et al., 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2024). This stress, especially due to its often persistent nature, puts correctional officers at risk of experiencing symptoms of burnout, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Although it appears to be widely acknowledged that being a correctional officer is both physically and mentally demanding, the existing body of research that investigated the mental wellness of correctional officers was lacking.

Existing research has shown that correctional officers report experiencing burnout (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Research has also indicated that certain types of occupational stress and burnout can result in impaired empathic ability among correctional officers (Lavoie et al., 2006) and result in anger and aggression among similar forensic occupations such as law enforcement (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011). However, recent research was limited when it comes to examining the relationship between burnout, empathy, and aggression among correctional officers. Aggression and use of force incidents in jails and prisons have been mentioned in the media as a problem somewhat regularly, but clear data on the frequency of these events are not widely accessible to the public due to the confidential nature of that information. It is critical to better understand how burnout among correctional officers may be playing a role in the way they relate to the population they serve and the way they complete their job duties.

In doing so, I sought to provide information that institutions may use to better support the mental health and wellness of their correctional officers, which may create a safer work environment for everyone. The current study aimed to address the existing gap in research and encourage further exploration into this topic and population. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the study's topic, research problem, purpose, research questions, and hypotheses. I also present the study's theoretical framework, nature, important definitions, assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and significance, and conclude with a summary.

### **Background**

Correctional officers are known to work in one of the most stressful occupations in the forensic field, with daily stressors including understaffing, mandatory overtime, and poor support from management (Bishopp et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2024). Correctional officers are also exposed to dangerous and potentially traumatic situations at work at a rate comparable to other forensic occupations, putting them at a higher risk for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other trauma-related mental health disorders (Fusco et al., 2021). The stress experienced working as a correctional officer is often persistent in nature, which puts them at a higher risk of experiencing burnout (Fusco et al., 2021). Burnout symptoms frequently reported by correctional officers include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and poor personal accomplishment (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020), and correctional officers generally reference forced overtime, exposure to inmate assaults, and colleague suicides as contributing factors to their burnout (Bishopp et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2024).

Burnout can present a number of problems for correctional officers, including impairing their empathic abilities, making them less understanding and more critical of the population they serve (Lavoie et al., 2006), driving them to utilize coping skills that are not maladaptive to them such as substance abuse and isolation (Abeyta, 2023), and increasing feelings of depression and trauma-related symptoms (Fusco et al., 2021). Correctional officers have been found to be hesitant about reaching out for help when they are experiencing distress, in part due to the culture of corrections and the stigmatization of mental health treatment (Wills et al., 2021), but also due to an uncertainty about how to reach out for help when they need it. This apprehension to seek treatment is especially troubling when coupled with all of the risk factors previously discussed. This population is not only at higher risk of mental health distress and burnout but also shows resistance to seeking professional mental health support.

Burnout and its relationship with aggression have not been investigated fully by researchers, but burnout has been found to have a relationship with increased deviant behaviors and intimate partner violence among similar forensic occupations, such as police officers (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011). Therefore, it stands to reason that this relationship could exist among correctional officers as well, which warranted the need for further study.

### **Problem Statement**

Correctional officers work in stressful and high-risk environments, which results in a higher probability of exposure to potentially traumatic events (Fusco et al., 2021). This exposure to potential trauma and constant stress can result in negative outcomes

such as burnout (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020), increased substance use (Abeyta, 2023), aggressive behavior (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011), and high job turnover (Harney & Lerman, 2021). Although research addressed correctional officers' risk of burnout, little research examined whether symptoms of burnout could be associated with higher levels of aggression or higher acceptance of aggressive behaviors among correctional staff. Understanding this relationship could result in opportunities to make improvements to working conditions and resources available to correctional staff that would improve their quality of life and reduce the risk of burnout.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between burnout (independent variable [IV]) and aggression (dependent variable [DV]) among correctional officers, investigate the relationship between empathy (IV) and aggression (DV), and examine how burnout (IV) and empathy (IV) impact aggression (DV) together. Given the evidence in recent research that burnout is a problem faced by correctional employees resulting from a variety of stressors they face at work (Bishopp et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2024), it was my hope that the current study would encourage more investigation into this issue and facilitate efforts to make administrative changes to better support the mental health and well-being of correctional staff.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ1: What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of burnout and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

$H_0$ 1: There is no relationship between burnout and aggression.

$H_{a1}$ : There is a relationship between burnout and aggression.

RQ2: What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of empathy and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

$H_{o2}$ : There is no relationship between correctional staff's empathy and aggression.

$H_{a2}$ : There is a relationship between correctional staff's empathy and aggression.

RQ3: How do empathy and burnout together affect correctional staff's levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

$H_{o3}$ : Empathy and burnout together have no effect on correctional staff's levels of aggression.

$H_{a3}$ : Empathy and burnout together have an effect on correctional staff's levels of aggression.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

General strain theory (GST), as proposed by Agnew (2007), suggests that individuals respond to stressors, such as loss, negative treatment, or goal failure, through corrective action aimed at alleviating the strain. Although these actions may be adaptive, GST emphasizes their potential to manifest as deviant or violent behavior, particularly when legal coping mechanisms are inaccessible, the strain is perceived as unjust, or emotional regulation is compromised. Chronic exposure to strain may also cultivate enduring traits such as anger, increasing the likelihood of maladaptive responses (Agnew, 2007).

Empirical studies have applied GST across many different populations. Zapolski et al. (2018) found that perceived police injustice, a source of strain, was positively associated with aggression and moral disengagement among juvenile offenders. GST has also informed research on law enforcement personnel. Bishopp et al. (2018) linked occupational strain among police officers to heightened anger, depression, and burnout. Similarly, A. Anderson and Lo (2011) identified a positive relationship between chronic occupational stress and self-reported intimate partner violence in police, underscoring how strain may deplete emotional resources and promote maladaptive coping.

Research on correctional officers was limited but appeared to be increasing. Hull et al. (2025) identified inmate-related, administrative, and emotional work strain as predictors of social and institutional deviance, while personal life strain showed no significant effect. These findings suggest that experiencing strain, specifically related to correctional officers' occupation, could be encouraging corrective action in the form of deviant behavior. It stands to reason that this deviant behavior could extend to include aggression, which is why the GST was used to understand the variables of interest and population in the current study.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a quantitative nonexperimental correlational design to investigate the relationship between burnout (IV), empathy (IV), and aggression (DV). The population of interest was correctional officers working in jails or prisons in the United States. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. A flyer was created and posted on social media that included a link to the survey for those interested in participating. No

identifying data were collected, and all survey answers remained anonymous. The only inclusion criteria for participants were that they were currently employed as a uniformed correctional officer at a jail or prison in the United States. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were used to determine the relationship between burnout, empathy, and levels of aggression.

### **Definitions**

*Aggression:* Any behavior, physical or verbal, that is carried out with the intent of causing harm to a person or object (C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

*Burnout:* A syndrome characterized by depersonalization, detachment, and emotional exhaustion that is believed to be a result of sustained stress experienced in the workplace (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020).

*Depersonalization:* A facet of burnout that presents as feeling negative, callous, or detached toward clients, colleagues, or the work itself (Maslach et al., 1997).

*Emotional exhaustion:* The central and most recognizable facet of burnout that is characterized by feeling emotionally drained (Maslach et al., 1997).

*Empathy:* The ability to recognize, understand, or share the emotional experience of others (Stosic et al., 2022).

*Personal accomplishment:* Reduced personal accomplishment is a facet of burnout characterized by feelings of incompetence, poor efficacy, or feeling unable to meet the demands of one's job, often resulting from feelings of being unappreciated,

underrecognized, and unsupported in the workplace by management (Maslach et al., 1997).

*Strain*: The result of significant stressors placed on an individual that result in feelings of frustration, anger, or feelings of injustice (Agnew, 2007).

### **Assumptions**

In this study, there are several assumptions. The first assumption was that participants would be honest about their employment as a correctional officer when completing the survey. I also assumed that participants would read the survey questions fully and answer honestly about their experiences of burnout and feelings of aggression. I assumed that delivering the surveys in a way in which participants could complete them privately and be assured that their answers would be confidential and their identity would be protected would alleviate some of the apprehension they may have felt about truthfully disclosing their feelings.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The goal of this study was to determine whether burnout has any relationship to aggression among correctional officers. I also examined whether empathy has any relationship to aggression and whether there is any interplay between empathy and burnout and their relationship to aggression. This study focused on a sample of correctional officers working in jails or prisons in the United States. Previous research had explored the prevalence of burnout among correctional officers and how it may impact other aspects of their mental health and coping (Abeyta, 2023), but little research

had examined how burnout among correctional officers may impact their levels of aggression.

### **Limitations**

This study had some limitations, one of which was the use of convenience sampling. Convenience sampling may limit the generalizability and representativeness of the findings. Further, the measures used were self-report measures, which relied on participants being truthful and forthcoming with their responses. It is also possible that participants may have been inclined to answer in a way that presented them in the most positive manner. To combat this, I emphasized the confidentiality of the surveys and delivered the surveys online so that participants could complete them privately, with no identifying information collected.

### **Significance**

This research is significant because it addressed a gap in research regarding correctional officers' burnout and aggression. Results may provide insight into how correctional officers experience burnout and how burnout experienced at work can influence their feelings of aggression toward the population they serve. Results may also provide information about how burnout may or may not impair the empathic capabilities of correctional officers and whether empathy is associated with aggression. The results of this research may facilitate further efforts to understand how burnout affects correctional officers so that efforts can be made to better support this population and advocate for institutional changes that may improve their mental health and wellness.

## Summary

Correctional officers face numerous occupational stressors such as exposure to inmate violence, compulsory overtime, high staff turnover, and repeated encounters with potentially traumatic events (Bishopp et al., 2018; Fusco et al., 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2024). These ongoing stressors significantly increase the likelihood of developing burnout, which may manifest through emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal achievement (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Although the demanding nature of correctional work has been generally recognized, research focused on the psychological well-being of correctional officers was limited.

Existing studies confirmed that correctional officers frequently report symptoms of burnout, and some findings suggested that chronic workplace stress and burnout may negatively affect their capacity for empathy (Lavoie et al., 2006). Moreover, in parallel forensic professions such as law enforcement, such conditions have been linked to increased anger and aggression (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011). However, there was limited empirical investigation into how burnout may influence empathy and aggression within the correctional officer population.

Understanding how burnout may affect correctional officers' perceptions of and interactions with incarcerated individuals was essential. Such insight may inform strategies to enhance institutional support systems, thereby promoting staff well-being and institutional safety. The current study sought to contribute to the existing literature by addressing this gap and encouraging deeper inquiry into these critical dynamics.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Working in a corrections setting is considered among the most stressful occupations one can hold because correctional staff are regularly exposed to physical health risks, mental health risks, and regular contact with inmates who are sometimes verbally and physically aggressive (Fusco et al., 2021). This regular exposure to stress can affect correctional staff in a number of adverse ways including higher rates of substance abuse (Abeyta, 2023), PTSD, social anxiety (Fusco et al., 2021), job turnover (Harney & Lerman, 2021), and burnout (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Burnout is a risk factor that has only recently received attention with regard to correctional staff. Burnout is a syndrome that is common among those who work in fields where they serve people to some degree, and burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of low personal accomplishment (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Burnout is common among those working in correctional settings because they are frequently exposed to situations that are emotional, dangerous, and extremely stressful (Fusco et al., 2021). Understanding how burnout impacts correctional staff is critical because burnout has been found to adversely impact things such as level of empathy (Turgoose et al., 2017) and perceptions of the population being served (Olson et al., 2021) among correctional employees. These are factors that could potentially contribute to the growing problem of excessive use of force by correctional staff against inmates in recent years (Rembert & Henderson, 2014).

The possible connection between burnout, empathy, and aggression can be better understood by viewing the phenomenon through the lens of GST. GST is a theory that

suggests a connection between exposure to strain and aggressive or deviant behavior (Agnew, 2007). This theory was applied in the current study to understand how exposure to stressful situations and dangerous work environments may result in symptoms of burnout that decrease empathy and increase aggressive tendencies among correctional staff.

This chapter includes an exhaustive review of the existing research on the phenomenon of burnout as it applies correctional staff. The risk factors of burnout are explored, as well as the relationships between symptoms of burnout and aggression among correctional staff. The possible relationship between burnout and levels of empathy is also discussed. This literature review supported the existing gap in existing research on this topic, which warranted the need for the current study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

#### **Databases Used**

The databases used to locate existing literature on the topic under study included the following. APA PsycInfo, run by the American Psychological Association (APA), contains books pertaining to the field of psychology, peer-reviewed psychology articles, and dissertations. APA PsychArticles, also run by the APA, contains peer-reviewed psychology articles. SAGEJournals, not run by the APA, contains journal articles pertaining to the field of psychology.

#### **Keywords and Research Barriers**

I began my search by first exploring existing literature related to burnout among corrections employees. I used the key terms: *burnout*, *burn-out*, *burn out*, *corrections*

*officers, corrections staff*. I paired the different variations of *burnout* with *corrections officers* and *corrections staff* to locate literature pertaining to burnout among corrections staff. I also wanted to explore how burnout was being defined and measured in existing research. After getting a general understanding of burnout among the population under study, I expanded my search by adding additional key terms: *law enforcement, aggression, aggressive behavior, violence, use of force*. I added the key term *law enforcement* to get an idea of how a very similar population to the one under study experiences burnout and aggression. I added the terms *aggression, aggressive behavior, violence, use of force* to begin researching the problem of aggression among corrections employees and similar populations. Finally, I added the key term *empathy* to my search to explore existing research related to empathy among corrections employees and also gain an understanding of how empathy is conceptualized and measured in existing research. I primarily searched for research published within the 2020 – 2025 date range.

The main barrier I ran into while searching for existing literature was that there is not a large quantity of existing research on burnout and aggression as it relates to corrections employees. This issue became more apparent when adding empathy to the search as it narrowed the scope down even further. To mitigate this issue, I expanded my search to look at similar populations, such as law enforcement. I also spent time exploring research related to aggression and corrections officers, then empathy and corrections officers, and finally burnout and corrections officers rather than trying to find literature that included all the key terms at once.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

General Strain Theory (GST) posits that individuals who experience certain types of stressors or frustration will be inclined to engage in “corrective action” in response to their stressors (Agnew, 2007). The corrective action they engage in can manifest in many ways, but GST focuses on the potential for corrective action to manifest as violent or criminal behavior (Agnew, 2007). According to Agnew (2007), the corrective action is intended to reduce the strain they are experiencing or achieve catharsis or revenge against the source of their strain. While it is possible for corrective action to manifest as legal or adaptive ways of coping with strain, it may also present in more maladaptive and deviant ways if the individual does not have easy access to legal means of reducing the strain.

Agnew (2007) described three types of strain that people may experience, and these include losing something of value, being treated negatively by others, and being unable to meet their needs or achieve their goals. This can include scenarios such as having a car repossessed, being physically abused by a significant other, or being unable to purchase an item or vacation due to lack of funds. These types of strain are more likely to result in violence when they are perceived as severe, unjust, or easily resolved by violence (Agnew, 2007). Certain types of strain also have an increased chance of resulting in violent corrective action whenever there is a reduction of the individual’s ability to cope with the strain in a legal manner, the perceived cost of violent action is diminished, or the strain creates a predisposition for violence (Agnew, 2007). Agnew (2007) theorized that chronic exposure to strain could predispose people to violence by

exhausting their resources to cope in a legal manner or fostering the development of negative emotional traits, such as trait anger.

Existing research has applied GST to juvenile offenders and explored how perceived police injustice as a source of strain influences juvenile offenders' moral disengagement and aggression (Zapolski et al., 2018). This study found that perceived police injustice was correlated positively with juvenile offenders' aggressive behavior and moral disengagement (Zapolski et al., 2018). Results of their study provide an example of how exposure to strain that feels unjust or unfair can increase the likelihood of corrective action that is deviant in nature.

It is important to note that different types of strain can affect many different types of populations and sometimes result in corrective action that is criminal or delinquent in nature. For example, a longitudinal study by Shadmanfaat et al. (2021) explored how strain can impact the behavior of sports fans. Their study found that the experience of strain (*negative life events; victimization; bullying; economic pressure*) was predictive of aggressive behavior (*spitting on rivals; thrown objects at rivals; fighting with rival fans; damaging property*) by sports fans against rival teams and rival fans. These results align with GST's position that different sources of strain may result in corrective action and deviant and/or aggressive behavior among different populations.

GST has also been applied to law enforcement populations, including police officers. These studies have found that workplace strain is associated with higher levels of anger, depression, and burnout (Bishopp et al., 2018), which aligns with the belief that exposure to strain can foster the development of negative emotional states. A study by

Anderson and Lo (2011) applied GST to explore how different types of strain are associated with self-reported intimate partner violence among police officers. Results of their study suggested a positive relationship between negative emotions (*feeling tired despite adequate sleep; withdrawn, as a result of unrelenting job demands; feeling physically, emotionally, or spiritually depleted*) and self-reported intimate partner violence among a population of police officers (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011). The relationship between feeling tired, withdrawn, rundown by job demands, and emotionally depleted echoes the position of GST that chronic exposure to strain results in a depletion of resources necessary to cope with the strain in a manner that is healthy and appropriate, which increases the likelihood of aggressive and/or illegal manners of coping.

Hull et al. (2025) similarly explored how strain impacts correctional officers; specifically, how institutional and personal life strain may influence correctional officers' choices to engage in deviant behaviors. Their study explored three primary sources of strain: inmate-related strain (being assaulted by inmates, threats of violence from inmates, witnessing assaults), administrative strain (perceived lack of support, poor mentorship from prison leadership), work-related emotional strain (burnout, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion from job demands), and personal life strain (family, health, financial issues). Their findings suggested that inmate-related strain, administrative strain, and work-related emotional strain were significantly associated with increased social deviance (bullying/disrespecting inmates, saying hurtful or offensive things, playing mean-spirited pranks) (Hull et al., 2025). Inmate and administrative-related strains also predict institutional deviance (taking unauthorized breaks, sleeping on the

job, destroying inmate property), whereas personal life strain does not significantly contribute to either form of misconduct (Hull et al., 2025).

Abeyta (2023) applied GST to explore the impact of strain on corrections officers; specifically, they evaluated how different types of strain may impact maladaptive strategies for coping with distress, such as substance abuse. Their study found that strain (comprised of *job dissatisfaction, poor procedural justice, poor administrative support, occupational stress, negative inmate interactions*) was significantly positively associated with distress (*depression and life stress; detachment*), and distress was significantly positively associated with substance abuse (Abeyta, 2023). Their results indicated that distress served as a mediator between strain and substance abuse. Aside from the previously mentioned study, there is currently very little existing research that explores the experience of burnout and workplace strain through the lens of GST that focuses on the experience of corrections officers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Stress in Corrections**

Working in a correctional facility, specifically as a uniformed staff member, is considered to be one of the most stressful occupations due, in part, to repeated exposure to stressful and dangerous situations in the line of work. For example, a study by Fusco et al. (2021) found that correctional officers are significantly more likely to be exposed to potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTs) in the workplace than their wellness service counterparts. Examples of the PPTs that correctional officers reported being exposed to include line-of-duty injuries, suicides of colleagues, and exposure to events

that could result in their own injury or death (Fusco et al., 2021). These exposures are correlated with higher rates of PTSD, depression, and other mental health symptoms among officers, even when controlling for sex, years of service, and number of PPTEs. While both correctional officers and correctional wellness staff report elevated levels of distress relative to the general population, as well as similar reported rates of suicidal ideation, correctional officers are disproportionately affected. Specifically, they demonstrate higher scores on standardized screening tools such as the PCL-5 for PTSD, PHQ-9 for depression, PDSS for panic disorder, and SIPS for social anxiety (Fusco et al., 2021). This study provides a very clear example of how the high levels of stress and potentially traumatic incidents that correctional officers face regularly as part of their job duties can be directly damaging to their mental health and wellness.

In addition to being exposed frequently to potentially traumatic events, research has found that correctional employees report experiencing secondary trauma at a rate higher than that experienced by members of other forensic-related occupations (Page & Robertson, 2021). Predictors of work-related distress and symptoms of secondary trauma experienced by correctional employees included role-related factors, organizational factors, and personal factors (Page & Robertson, 2021). Further, correctional employees have identified poor support from administration, negative inmate interactions, and dissatisfaction with their jobs as being significant contributors to the strain they experience at work (Abeyta, 2023). This is troubling when it is known that correctional officers are exposed frequently to incidents that may cause trauma. Correctional facilities also have a tendency to be drastically understaffed, resulting in mandatory overtime

multiple times a week for correctional officers. A qualitative study by Ricciardelli et al. (2024) explored the impact of mandated and voluntary overtime on correctional officers. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, they discovered that overtime, often mandatory and unplanned, tends to undermine the mental health of correctional officers, disrupt work-life balance, and foster occupational stress (Ricciardelli et al., 2024). Core themes of the semi-structured interviews with correctional officers found included feelings of loss of control, personal and family life strain, reduced feelings of autonomy, and negative, diminished support system (Ricciardelli et al., 2024). This study highlights the variety of factors present in correctional officers' job duties that cause them significant strain, emphasizing the need to better understand how this strain and potential burnout may be affecting or interacting with other aspects of correctional officers' mental health.

An often less-considered stressor that is faced by correctional officers is the negative portrayal by the media. Ricciardelli et al. (2023) explored how negative media portrayals may play in a role in the occupational stress felt by correctional officers, and found that the stigmatization of correctional work and lack of acknowledgment for their occupation was a common theme that came up during interviews. Correctional employees even reported avoiding wearing uniforms in public, fearing social judgment, and experiencing diminished morale due to lack of public acknowledgment (Ricciardelli et al., 2023). This study shows how even the title of being a corrections officer can carry a significant amount of stress, indicating that the strain experienced by correctional officers does not necessarily remain within the walls of the institution.

A factor that compounds upon the slew of work-related stressors and strain placed on correctional staff in their workplace is the tendency for correctional staff to gravitate toward coping skills that are not healthy and often detrimental to their physical and mental health (Harney & Lerman, 2021). Research has found that correctional staff experience higher levels of maladaptive coping skills and adverse effects on their mental health due to the strain they experience regularly at work (Harney & Lerman, 2021). For example, 53.2% of correctional officers report that they believe they have become harsher and less trusting since they began their careers (Harney & Lerman, 2021). Strain has been found to be associated with higher levels of depression, life stress, detachment, and substance abuse (Abeyta, 2023). Exposure to stress at work has also been found to be associated with more symptoms of depression among corrections officers, and higher levels of depressive symptoms have been found to be significantly related to positive attitudes toward mistreatment of inmates (Worley et al., 2023). Likely contributing to the everyday strain experienced at work is the high rates of turnover (20-25%) and frequent understaffing at correctional facilities (Harney & Lerman, 2021). The frequent understaffing present in correctional facilities not only exacerbates the strain placed on correctional employees by requiring them to work longer hours but also results in facilities that are less safe, making it more likely that correctional staff will be exposed to dangerous and potentially traumatic events.

The impact of the stress experienced by correctional staff is likely exacerbated by their frequent unwillingness to reach out for help and treatment for their mental health. A study by Wills et al. (2021) investigated the institutional barriers that impede help-

seeking behaviors among correctional officers. Drawing on qualitative data from two phases, interviews with family and friends of correctional officers who died by suicide and open-ended responses from currently employed correctional officers, the research identifies how the institutional culture and structure within correctional environments contribute to reluctance to seek psychological support (Wills et al., 2021). Wills et al. (2021) found that the culture and structure of the institution were the most common themes present during interviews discussing why correctional staff may not reach out for help when needed. Specifically, the subjects reported that the institutional culture promoted beliefs that reaching out for help with mental health concerns could jeopardize one's job, reputation, and may imply that they are weak or "soft" (Wills et al., 2021). Further, it was found that correctional officers often reported lacking faith or trust in the institutions available to them for mental health treatment, believing their information may not be kept confidential or there may be punitive responses to their seeking help (Wills et al., 2021). Therefore, it is quite common for correctional officers who are feeling under significant strain at work, exposed to traumatic events and violence, and in need of mental health treatment or support to suffer in silence rather than reach out to friends, family, or mental health professionals for help.

### **Burnout**

Burnout is a syndrome characterized by depersonalization, detachment, and emotional exhaustion that is believed to be a result of sustained stress experienced in the workplace (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). This syndrome is most commonly experienced by individuals working in professions that deal with other people directly

and is very common among public service professionals such as nurses, law enforcement, and correctional staff (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Maslach and Leiter (1997) conceptualized burnout as a chronic response to persistent interpersonal and organizational stressors in the workplace. Maslach and Leiter (1997) emphasized the systemic origins of burnout, arguing that it arises from long-term mismatches between workers and key aspects of their work environment. These mismatches occur in six core domains: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. When employees experience ongoing discrepancies in these areas, such as excessive workload, lack of autonomy, inadequate acknowledgment or appreciation from management, or ethical conflicts, the result is an erosion of engagement, leading to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal efficacy. Maslach and Leiter (1997) describe burnout as both a psychological and organizational concern, meaning changes must be made to improve the quality of the working environment in order to prevent or mitigate the effects of burnout on employees.

Maslach et al. (1997) theorized that burnout occurs when an employee, most commonly a public service professional, depletes their emotional resources within the context of a stressful work environment, resulting in the employee having no resources left to provide empathy and psychological resources to others any longer. This often manifests as the three facets of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Emotional exhaustion is considered the central and most recognizable feature, characterized by feelings of being emotionally drained and unable to meet the emotional demands of the job, which in many

cases involves providing care, empathy, and emotional support to the population being served (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). This leads to a sense of depletion that, in turn, fosters the second facet of burnout: depersonalization. Depersonalization presents as a negative, callous, or detached attitude toward clients, colleagues, or the work itself (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Depersonalization often manifests as emotional distancing or disengagement. This generally serves as a protective coping mechanism for the individual who has depleted all of their emotional resources, but it also results in diminished quality of interpersonal relationships and professional care (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). The third facet, reduced personal accomplishment, reflects a decline in feelings of competence and efficacy, where individuals feel ineffective, unproductive, and unable to meet the demands of their roles. This facet can result from sustained feelings of being underappreciated, underrecognized, and unsupported in the workplace by management (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Existing research suggests correctional officers have a particularly high risk of burnout compared to other public service professionals (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). For example, when compared to non-uniformed staff working in correctional settings, uniformed staff were found to report significantly higher rates of burnout than non-uniformed staff (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Correctional employees have also been found to experience burnout at a degree comparable to members of other forensic-related occupations due to high workloads, exposure to trauma, and organizational stressors (Page & Robertson, 2021). The effects that burnout has on the behavior, physical health, and mental health of corrections officers is something that has been explored by existing

research. Lavoie et al. (2006) found that increased levels of burnout played a role in how corrections officers perceived inmates with mental health disorders. Specifically, Lavoie et al. (2006) found that higher levels of the emotional exhaustion facet of burnout were a significant predictor of lower positive regard for inmates with mental health disorders. They also found that the depersonalization facet of burnout was a significant predictor of corrections officers' negative perceptions of inmates who were neurotypical (Lavoie et al., 2006). This suggests that the experience of burnout, specifically the facets of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, may result in less than empathetic views of both mentally ill and neurotypical offenders. Lavoie et al. (2006) did find that correctional officers' attitudes toward mentally ill inmates have become more positive over time, but they are still regarded in a more negative light than individuals who are mentally ill and not currently incarcerated. Given the fact that correctional officers play a large role in managing the behaviors and emotions of both neurotypical and mentally ill offenders, these findings highlight the need for improvement in the workplace to reduce burnout and support the mental health and wellness of correctional officers to ensure a safe workplace for all staff and offenders.

Concerning risk factors of burnout, existing research has found that job satisfaction is negatively correlated with burnout, and work stress is positively correlated with burnout (Senol-Durak et al., 2021). This means that correctional staff who do not find their job rewarding are more susceptible to experiencing symptoms of burnout and feeling more overstressed and overwhelmed by their job. Interestingly, and somewhat counterintuitively, work stress was also positively associated with positive affect,

potentially due to job habituation, institutional changes, or perceived job prestige among correctional officers (Senol-Durak et al., 2021).

Logan et al. (2024) found that correctional officers reported significantly higher levels of all burnout dimensions compared to police and sheriff personnel, suggesting that the correctional environment is particularly taxing on the well-being and emotional resources of employees. This study further suggested that being a sworn officer predicted higher overall burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization, likely due to the increased exposure to occupational hazards such as trauma, violence, and emotional labor relative to nonsworn personnel (Logan et al., 2024). Logan et al. (2024) found that female correctional staff were at an increased risk of emotional exhaustion relative to their male counterparts, as were employees who reported a longer tenure.

Wang et al. (2024) recognized the body of research suggesting that correctional officers are at a heightened risk of work stress and burnout and sought to understand if there were more variables present within this relationship. Their study explored the relationship between workplace violence and burnout among correctional officers, focusing on how stress and insomnia may act as mediating variables. They found that workplace violence was significantly associated with increased burnout, but this relationship is fully mediated by stress and insomnia. This means that workplace violence on its own does not predict burnout, but instead predicts stress and/or insomnia which predicts burnout (Wang et al., 2024).

While it is true that correctional staff are at a much higher risk of experiencing strain at work and symptoms of burnout, research has also found that there are some

protective factors present that can decrease the likelihood of correctional staff experiencing severe symptoms of burnout, or at least mitigate the negative impact that burnout may have on correctional staff's mental health and well-being. For instance, Lavoie et al. (2006) found that providing training for corrections officers that is geared toward psychoeducation improved corrections officers' perceptions of mentally ill inmates. Durak et al. (2021) found results suggesting that improving the job satisfaction of correctional officers would decrease their likelihood of feeling overstressed and reduce their likelihood of experiencing symptoms of burnout. Logan et al. (2024) explored the role that prior military experience may play in the development of burnout among corrections officers, and the results of their study suggested that prior military service was associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion when compared to corrections officers with no prior military service. However, their results indicated no significant difference in levels of depersonalization when compared to corrections officers with no prior military service (Logan et al., 2024). There was also no difference when it came to overall burnout, which suggests that there are differences between corrections officers with and without a history of military service only when it comes to specific facets of burnout (Logan et al., 2024).

### **Empathy**

The existing body of research offers limited insight into the construct of empathy among correctional employees, especially uniformed staff. This is concerning given the fact that correctional officers, often working 12-hour shifts, spend the most time face-to-face with the incarcerated individuals. A study by Mears et al. (2022) investigated how

working in long-term restrictive housing, an extreme form of incarceration characterized by prolonged solitary confinement, shapes prison personnel's perceptions of incarcerated individuals' humanity. The authors hypothesize that long-term restrictive housing work fosters dehumanizing views through mechanisms including brutalization, organizational culture, role conflict, and empathy fatigue. Results from quantitative data suggested that those who worked in long-term restrictive housing expressed slightly more humanizing views of incarcerated individuals in long-term restrictive housing, while those in disciplinary confinement held more dehumanizing views (Mears et al., 2022).

Interestingly, qualitative data suggested more prevalent negative perceptions among long-term restrictive housing staff, who frequently described inmates in dehumanizing terms and often referenced their proclivity for violence and manipulation (Mears et al., 2022). Staff also reported experiencing emotional detachment, role-based dissonance, and organizational reinforcement of punitive ideologies (Mears et al., 2022). This study sheds some light on factors that may be contributing to emotional fatigue and the development of certain aspects of burnout among correctional officers.

Quintero et al. (2018) explored empathy and emotional recognition among administrative employees and correctional officers at a juvenile detention center. Results indicated that administrative staff exhibited significantly higher empathy scores than correctional officers. Women, regardless of role, also scored higher on empathy measures than men (Quintero et al., 2018). Emotion recognition abilities varied between groups: administrative staff demonstrated superior recognition of disgust, whereas correctional officers frequently confused disgust with anger. Additionally, empathy was positively

associated with the recognition of sadness, but only within the administrative group, suggesting a potential occupational modulation of affective attunement (Quintero et al., 2018). However, their study did not yield any results indicative of how correctional officers' levels of empathy may compare to those of the general population, or how factors such as stress or burnout may interact with empathy.

### **Intersection of Burnout and Empathy**

It is important to understand how correctional work may impact empathy among correctional staff, but how exactly does burnout fit into the equation? While numerous studies have documented high levels of burnout among correctional officers, particularly the dimension of depersonalization, these findings only imply a tendency among officers to exhibit diminished empathy and reduced positive regard toward incarcerated individuals. However, a comprehensive review of the extant literature reveals very few studies that explicitly conceptualize empathy as a dependent variable in relation to occupational burnout. However, some existing research has sought to understand how burnout and empathy may interplay with one another. Lavoie et al. (2006) investigated how burnout impacts correctional officers' perceptions of inmates with mental health disorders in relation to their perceptions of non-disordered inmates, but did not explore the specific variable of empathy. The study found that the emotional exhaustion associated with burnout predicted more negative perceptions of mentally ill inmates and depersonalization predicted more negative perceptions of non-disordered inmates (Lavoie et al., 2006). These results could suggest that burnt-out corrections officers are depleting the emotional resources required to adequately empathize with mentally ill inmates who

likely require more cognitive and emotional resources than their non-disordered counterparts.

Compassion is often seen as a positive trait when it comes to frontline workers, similar to and including corrections staff. However, too much compassion, especially when the results of one's efforts to empathize with and help the population served are not easily seen, can deplete emotional resources and potentially result in symptoms of burnout that include emotional exhaustion (Ropes & Boer, 2021). Ropes and Boer (2021) used a population of frontline workers (non-profit social workers) to explore the relationship between compassion and burnout.

Specifically, they looked at compassionate motivation for their clients and empathic concern for their clients and how these facets of compassion were associated with symptoms of burnout. Results of this study found that frontline workers who reported higher levels of compassionate motivation had lower levels of burnout, which could suggest that lower levels of burnout result in frontline workers with more compassionate motivation, or that compassionate motivation is a protective factor against burnout (Ropes & Boer, 2021). This was the opposite of what they had hypothesized would happen. However, their study also found a positive relationship between empathic concern and burnout, suggesting that frontline workers who expend more emotional resources on clients may become burnt out faster, likely due to depleting their emotional resources (Ropes & Boer, 2021). Overall, their study suggests that having a strong motivation driven by compassion to help clients may mitigate the effects of burnout, but

that overextending one's emotional resources during work may also increase the likelihood of experiencing symptoms of burnout.

When it comes to the relationship between empathy and burnout, current research tends to explore empathy as a potential precursor or risk factor to burnout. For example, Stosic et al. (2022) explored how different types of empathy can impact the risk of burnout among those working in helping professions. Stosic et al. (2022) divided empathy into two categories: positive empathy (the ability to share in others' positive emotions) and negative empathy (the tendency to share in others' negative emotions). Their study found that positive empathy is consistently and significantly associated with lower levels of burnout, including reduced emotional exhaustion, secondary traumatic stress, and greater compassion satisfaction. This association was still significant even after controlling for cognitive empathy ability (the ability to accurately perceive others' emotions) and an individual's general optimistic worldview (Stosic et al., 2022). In contrast, negative empathy showed minimal or inconsistent associations with burnout. This study suggests that being emotionally attuned to others is not inherently draining and that being able to share in others' positive emotions may even serve as a buffer to the effects of burnout.

Another study by Trauernicht et al. (2021) explored the relationship between burnout and empathy and provided a different vantage point on the relationship, exploring empathy as an outcome of burnout rather than as a precursor to burnout. Trauernicht et al. (2021) used an experimental design to explore the causal relationship between empathy and burnout by inducing burnout symptoms and exploring how this

impacted the empathic capacities of individuals in their study. Their study found that participants who reported higher burnout symptoms, specifically emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, also demonstrated reduced performance on cognitive empathy tasks, or tasks that required them to deduce the mental states of others (Trauernicht et al., 2021). This study provided insight into the way that burnout symptoms may cause impaired or reduced empathy, at least temporarily.

A study by Mivshek and Schriver (2023) explored the relationship between empathy and burnout and investigated how the workplace and population being served may impact the relationship between these variables. Their study examined the interplay between burnout and empathy among mental health professionals working across correctional and community settings. Results suggested that working in correctional settings was significantly associated with higher levels of burnout, specifically emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, compared to those working in community settings (Mivshek & Schriver, 2023). Further, empathy levels did not significantly differ across treatment settings or client populations. However, self-reported empathy was inversely correlated with burnout, suggesting that heightened burnout may impair the ability to empathize effectively (Mivshek & Schriver, 2023). This study emphasizes the importance of further researching correctional staff in particular and how they may be at a heightened risk for burnout and impaired empathic abilities.

### **Culture of Corrections**

In addition to the theme of retaliation playing a role in instances of excessive use of force or aggressive behavior perpetrated by correctional officers, the overall culture of

corrections could also play a role. Schoenfeld and Everly (2023) explored the nature of the workplace culture of correctional employees and discovered common themes of distrust of prisoners, distancing from rehabilitation goals, and avoidance of relationships. Schoenfeld and Everly (2023) also found that correctional employees referenced conceptions related to security to rationalize their behaviors, and therefore referred to the correctional workplace culture as the “security mindset.” This idea of a correctional workplace culture was also explored by Higgins et al. (2021).

In their qualitative investigation, Higgins et al. (2021) conducted focus groups comprising both correctional officers and correctional program staff across multiple prison facilities. Through thematic analysis of the discussions, the researchers identified pervasive ideological constructs within correctional staff culture. A prominent theme that emerged was the prevalence of an “us-versus-them” mentality, which emphasized a divide between staff and incarcerated individuals. This dichotomous worldview was frequently accompanied by language and attitudes indicative of dehumanization, wherein incarcerated persons were portrayed as fundamentally different or inferior. The researchers interpreted this narrative as a psychosocial mechanism employed by staff to manage the occupational strain inherent in correctional work. Specifically, they argued that this dehumanizing framework contributes to the construction of a symbolic “badge of honor,” wherein the emotional and psychological toll of working with a stigmatized population is glorified and often seen as a sign of professional resilience (Higgins et al., 2021). Higgins et al. (2021) posited that the “us-them” dichotomy may not merely reflect interpersonal dynamics but may also function as a means to justify aggressive or violent

conduct toward incarcerated individuals by reframing acts of institutional violence as necessary or deserved responses to an inherently oppositional population. This aligns conceptually with General Strain Theory, which suggests that negative affective responses to occupational strain, particularly when coupled with moral disengagement, can lead to aggressive behavior (Higgins et al., 2021). These studies highlight how existing research has investigated the presence of aggression within the correctional setting through the lens of General Strain Theory, but the body of research is still limited when it comes to exploring aggression among correctional officers in relation to burnout.

### **Aggression**

Although the excessive use of non-lethal force in correctional settings has received substantial media attention, the academic literature addressing this phenomenon remains limited. This scarcity of scholarly research exploring this topic may be attributable, in part, to the restricted availability of official data concerning use-of-force incidents within correctional institutions (Rembert & Henderson, 2014). In response to this gap, Rembert & Henderson (2014) conducted a qualitative analysis of judicial decisions involving allegations of excessive force by correctional officers, identifying recurring patterns across cases. Their findings revealed that such incidents frequently involved retaliatory motives, insufficient officer training, and the presence of hostile or dehumanizing attitudes toward incarcerated individuals. Notably, the recurrent theme of retaliation corresponds with General Strain Theory (GST), which posits that individuals experiencing perceived injustice may engage in corrective or punitive behavior as a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to strain (Agnew, 2007).

The connection between GST and aggression among correctional officers was also explored by Hixon (2022), who used survey data from 539 correctional officers to investigate how workplace strains and social bonds influenced the likelihood of both lethal and less-than-lethal use of force. This study found that exposure to strains, specifically those that threatened the officers' safety, significantly increased the odds of use of force (Hixon, 2022). Interestingly, this study found that positive social bonds did not serve as a significant protective factor and were not associated with fewer reports of use of force incidents, suggesting that the strain of the workplace may erode any positive impact provided by social support and positive social relationships (Hixon, 2022).

Anger and frustration likely come to mind when one thinks of aggression, and to an extent, this is a valid assumption that has been supported often by existing research. However, there are more variables at play when considering the relationship between anger and aggressive behavior. For example, Garofalo and Kyriazi (2023) investigated the idea that not only what people feel (trait anger), but what they want to feel (emotion goals), plays a significant role in aggressive behavior. Garofalo and Kyriazi (2023) examined how the desire to experience anger (the emotion goal of anger) moderates the relationship between trait anger and both reactive aggression (impulsive, retaliatory) and proactive aggression (planned, goal-directed). Results indicated that both trait anger and the motivation to feel anger were positively associated with reactive and proactive aggression. However, trait anger alone predicted reactive aggression, while both trait anger and emotion goals independently predicted proactive aggression (Garofalo & Kyriazi, 2023). This research is important because it highlights that there is a lot more to

consider when it comes to the relationship between anger and aggression than a simple relationship between the two variables.

### **Intersection of Burnout and Aggression**

There is an apparent gap in the literature when it comes to investigating the relationship between burnout and aggression. However, Senol-Durak et al (2021) utilized a sample of correctional officers and explored the relationship between burnout, work stress, and trait anger, which existing studies have linked to certain types of aggression (Garofalo & Kyriazi, 2023). The Senol-Durak et al. (2021) study revealed that trait anger was directly associated with increased work stress, burnout, and negative affect. Work stress significantly predicted burnout and lower job satisfaction. Burnout was also found to be a mediating variable, linking both trait anger and work stress to increased negative affect and decreased positive affect (Senol-Durak et al., 2021). This study did not explore how these variables impact aggression, but understanding the heightened prevalence of trait anger, burnout, and work stress among correctional staff is important, as burnout, work strain, and trait anger have all been found to have connections to one another in various capacities.

Tzeletopoulou et al. (2018) explored the relationship between burnout and aggression and found no significant predictive power for burnout on aggression among mental health professionals. However, they discovered that burnout did tend to increase depression, which was found to be significantly related to aggressive behavior, possibly suggesting that depression mediates the relationship between burnout and aggression. A similar study by Spaan et al. (2024) that also utilized a sample of mental health

professionals found that higher levels of perceived stress were significantly associated with increased burnout and aggression. Notably, the use of avoidant coping strategies, such as denial and disengagement, was linked to elevated burnout and aggressive tendencies. Conversely, adaptive coping mechanisms, particularly problem-focused strategies, were associated with reduced levels of burnout and aggression (Spaan et al., 2024). Both of the previously mentioned studies utilized mental health professionals, which may not be comparable to that of correctional officers or those working in correctional settings; however, existing research exploring burnout as a predictor of aggression among correctional staff is extremely limited at this time.

Weisman de Mamani et al. (2025) did not explore the phenomenon of burnout in their study, but they did investigate how the existence of psychological distress may play a role on aggressive attitudes among police officers. Their study found that officers who reported experiencing more psychological distress and suicidality tended to exhibit a more stigmatized view of schizophrenic subjects, sometimes reporting more support for escalated use of force against schizophrenic subjects described in vignettes (Weisman de Mamani et al., 2025).

Another study that does not look specifically at burnout, but explored how exposure to stress or workplace strain may influence aggression among law enforcement, found a mediating relationship between stress, exposure to traumatic critical incidents, and aggressive behavior toward colleagues (Kurtz & Hughes, 2021). This means that police officers in their study who were exposed to traumatic critical incidents were found to be more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors toward their colleagues, but only if they

also reported experiencing increased stress. Exposure to a traumatic critical incident on its own was not a significant predictor of aggressive behavior (Kurtz & Hughes, 2021). What was also interesting about this study is that social support was not found to mitigate the effects of stress on aggressive behavior, meaning that police officers who reported high levels of stress and also reported strong support from family and/or friends were still at a significantly higher risk of aggression (Kurtz & Hughes, 2021). This study is concerning as it suggests the stress had such a profound impact on aggressive behavior that intervention by providing social support did not weaken the relationship. This emphasizes the importance of understanding how symptoms of burnout may be impacting aggression among correctional officers, as well as how it may be interacting with other variables, such as empathy.

### **Summary**

As it stands, there is a significant gap in research surrounding the correctional officer population as a whole, but even more so with regard to their risk of burnout and proclivity toward aggression and excessive use of force incidents. There is very little research to provide insight into the extent to which use of force incidents occur within the correctional setting and most of our information comes from the media as this information is often retained within confidential correctional facility records. While there is an existing body of research that explores the mental health and wellness of correctional officers, this is also somewhat lacking and often fails to explore how mental health interplays with burnout and aggression.

This study aims to address the gap in research and garner more insight into what factors put correctional officers at a higher risk of burnout symptoms. It also aims to improve understanding of how burnout symptoms may impact the way that correctional officers understand and empathize with the population they serve, as existing research tends to suggest that burnout, specifically emotional exhaustion and detachment, is often correlated with impaired empathy (Mivshek & Schriver, 2023; Trauernicht et al., 2021), and more negative perceptions of the inmate population (Lavoie et al., 2006). Improving understanding of this relationship among correctional officers is essential because they spend far more time working directly with the inmate population than their wellness and admin staff counterparts and are often forced to work overtime in understaffed facilities, that puts them at an even higher risk of burnout. This study will also begin addressing the lack of research into the relationship between burnout symptoms and aggression among correctional officers, as there is currently research to suggest a relationship between burnout and aggression exists (Weisman de Mamani et al., 2025), but this research often focuses on similar forensic professions rather than focusing on correctional officers.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate how burnout affects correctional officers, particularly with regard to their empathic abilities and attitudes toward aggression. Existing research has shown that correctional staff are significantly more likely to be exposed to traumatic incidents and be impacted by symptoms of burnout (Fusco et al., 2021; Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Additionally, existing research has investigated variables responsible for increased aggression and impaired empathic abilities among correctional officers (Hixon, 2022; Mears et al., 2022). However, a gap in research existed regarding how burnout, empathy, and aggression interplay and impact correctional officers. In the current study, I used a quantitative approach to investigate how burnout affects correctional officers, specifically its relationship with empathy and aggression.

In this chapter, I discuss the population and sampling methods that were used in this study, as well as any potential concerns regarding bias during the data collection process. The procedures and instruments used in this study are also discussed, as well as the reasoning behind their selection. Finally, ethical concerns and safeguards used throughout this study are identified, and any issues with trustworthiness are reviewed.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following three research questions and corresponding hypotheses were used to guide this study:

RQ1: What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of burnout and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

*H<sub>0</sub>1*: There is no relationship between burnout and aggression.

*H<sub>a</sub>1*: There is a relationship between burnout and aggression.

RQ2: What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of empathy and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

*H<sub>0</sub>2*: There is no relationship between correctional staff's empathy and aggression.

*H<sub>a</sub>2*: There is a relationship between correctional staff's empathy and aggression.

RQ3: How do empathy and burnout together affect correctional staff's levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

*H<sub>0</sub>3*: Empathy and burnout together have no effect on correctional staff's levels of aggression.

*H<sub>a</sub>3*: Empathy and burnout together have an effect on correctional staff's levels of aggression.

### **Phenomenon of Study**

The primary phenomenon being researched was burnout, which is believed to occur as a result of workplace strain and the depletion of emotional resources and is characterized by three facets of symptoms: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). The current study focused on how burnout impacts correctional officers. Correctional officers are exposed to occupational strain at a significantly higher rate than other occupations, be it in the form of being forced to work overtime to compensate for understaffing, or being exposed to traumatic incidents, including the risk of physical assaults (Fusco et al., 2021;

Ricciardelli et al., 2024). This exposure to persistent occupational strain puts them at a higher risk of burnout, which is why it is critical to understand how this burnout may be impacting them more fully. Specifically, how it may impact their empathic capabilities and aggression, which are both arguably critical aspects of their psyche involved in the safe and effective performance of their job duties.

This study also utilized the lens of GST which posits that persistent strain on an individual results in a higher likelihood of that individual engaging in criminal or deviant behavior, which may sometimes involve aggression, as a way to alleviate some of the strain they feel (Agnew, 2007).

### **Research Design**

This study used a nonexperimental, quantitative, correlational design to investigate the relationship between burnout (IV), empathy (IV), and aggression (DV) among correctional officers. A quantitative design was selected for this study so that I could collect numerical, continuous data and examine whether or not relationships existed among the variables, and if so, the nature of those relationships using statistical measures. A quantitative method was determined to be a good fit for ensuring reliability and validity, as it allows for objective measurement, standardized data collection, and statistical analysis that can be replicated across studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A non-experimental design was deemed the most appropriate for this study because there could not be any manipulation of the variables of interest. Questionnaires were used in this research as it was the most effective way to ensure confidentiality and ease of delivery to participants. It was also believed that this method would be appealing to

participants due to the privacy and ease of delivery and completion, improving the chances of participation from correctional officers.

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The population of interest was uniformed correctional staff working in jails and/or prisons. The sample included both male and female correctional officers located in the United States.

### **Sampling Method**

The sampling method was purposeful, as the sample was chosen based on participants having certain characteristics (uniformed correctional staff). The recruitment process was convenience sampling, which is not entirely random due to the sample needing to consist of participants all located in jails or prisons and working as uniformed correctional staff.

### **Participants**

This study utilized a sample of correctional officers currently employed in prisons or jails. The only inclusion variables for selection were employment as a uniformed correctional officer and that they be at least 18 years of age; there are no other demographic restrictions, such as age, tenure, race, or gender. This study will aim to recruit a sample size of 40 participants in order to have achieve .80 power, as estimated by G\*Power 3.1.

## **Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs**

### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

The demographic questionnaire took no more than two minutes to complete. It asks participants their age, gender, race, position, and length of time on the job.

### ***Maslach Burnout Inventory***

The Maslach Burnout Inventory was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) and is the most widely used scale for assessing symptoms of burnout. This measure is 22 items, scored on a 1 - 7 scale ranging from “never” to “daily”. This measure has three subscales for each of the three facets of burnout: emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalization. Participants rank each item in terms of the frequency with which they experience it, from 0 (never) to 6 (daily). This measure takes about five minutes to complete. This measure requires permission from the publisher, Mind Garden, to use. Therefore, I will reach out to them to obtain permission to administer this measure to participants in this study.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory was found to have good internal consistency as estimated by Cronbach’s coefficient alpha ( $n = 1,316$ ). Reliability coefficients for each of the three subscales were also found to be good, with coefficients of .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, .79 for Depersonalization, and .71 for Personal Accomplishments (Maslach et al., 1997). Test-retest reliability was evaluated with two samples, with testing separated by an interval of 2 to 4 weeks, and coefficients were the following for each subscale: .82 for Emotional Exhaustion, .60 for Depersonalization, and .80 for Personal Accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Convergent validity was tested by comparing

scores on the inventory to behavioral observations made by someone who knew the individual well, such as a spouse or coworker, and the measure was found to be valid (Maslach et al., 1997). Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory to similar scales, such as the Social Desirability Scale, and no significant correlations were found between these measures, suggesting good discriminant validity of this measure (Maslach et al., 1997). In addition to the Maslach et al. (1997) study that normed the Maslach Burnout Inventory of a sample of health service providers, the inventory has also been used effectively in numerous studies aimed at understanding how burnout affects those working in forensic populations. Lambert et al. (2015) provides an overview of 53 studies that explored the phenomenon of burnout among correctional staff and the Maslach Burnout Inventory was found to be the most used measure of burnout among this population, illustrating its effectiveness for investigating burnout in a forensic population.

### ***Interpersonal Reactivity Index***

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) is a 28-item questionnaire developed by Davis (1980) designed to measure four different dimensions of dispositional empathy. Specifically, the IRI measures the following dimensions of dispositional empathy: Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, Personal Distress, and Fantasy (Davis, 1980). Participants respond to items on a 5-point Likert Scale, indicating how much they believe each item describes them, 1 (does not describe me well) to 5 (describes me very well). This questionnaire takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. The IRI is public domain and is free to use in non-commercial settings, including research (Davis, 1980).

The IRI has been used in research with forensic populations and has been found to be a reliable and valid multidimensional measure of dispositional empathy (Compton et al., 2011). Compton et al. (2011) used the IRI in addition to other empathy scales in their study investigating empathy among law enforcement officers and found the IRI to have good test-retest reliability (18), as well as good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .62 (Compton et al., 2011). They also found the IRI to have good convergent validity with the Empathy Quotient, another commonly used measure of empathy (Compton et al., 2011).

### ***Aggression Questionnaire-Short Form***

The Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) is a 29-item questionnaire developed to assess verbal aggression, physical aggression, anger, and hostility. Items are answered on a 7-point Likert Scale with regard to how characteristic of the individual each item is (1 = extremely uncharacteristic of me, 5 = extremely characteristic of me). The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire-Short Form (BPAQ-SF) was developed by Bryant and Smith (2001) by reducing the original 29 items into a shorter, 12-item questionnaire that measures the same facets of aggression. This questionnaire takes approximately 2-5 minutes to complete. The BPAQ-SF is free to use for research and educational purposes with permission, which will be obtained prior to the start of this study (Bryant & Smith, 2001).

The BPAQ-SF is used commonly in studies with law enforcement and correctional officers and has been normed for law enforcement officers (Christopher et al., 2024). Christopher et al. (2024) used a sample of law enforcement officers to test the

psychometric properties of the BPAQ-SF for use with a forensic population. They found the internal consistency of this measure to be good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ) and the test-retest reliability to be good as well ( $r = .86$ ) (Christopher et al., 2024). Finally, convergent and divergent validity were found to be adequate, with correlations going in the expected directions with regard to other measures of aggression and hostility (Christopher et al., 2024).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

After data collection was complete, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. A linear regression analysis was used to evaluate how symptoms of burnout and levels of empathy related to levels of aggression. The first research question (What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of burnout and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?) was answered using the continuous data collected from the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Aggression Questionnaire-Short Form. This data was analyzed by way of linear regression analysis to determine the nature of the relationship between the independent variable (burnout) and the dependent variable (aggression). The second research question (What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of empathy and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?) was explored by using the continuous data collected from the IRI and the Aggression Questionnaire-Short Form. This data was also analyzed by way of a linear regression to determine the nature of the relationship between the independent variable (empathy) and the dependent variable (aggression). Finally, the third research question (How do empathy and burnout together

affect correctional staff's levels of aggression toward the population they serve?) was investigated by analyzing continuous data from all three questionnaires to determine the unique relationship of each independent variable (empathy and burnout) and if they interplay to have an impact on the dependent variable (aggression). All multiple regression assumptions were evaluated in SPSS (i.e., normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and independence of residuals).

### **Threats to Validity**

There were some threats to validity identified with this study. These include the use of convenience sampling, which is not entirely random in nature. This could potentially result in threats to the representativeness of the results, as well as the generalizability. Participants in this study must see a flyer advertising the study and choose to reach out and participate, which presents the possibility of self-selection bias. Those who choose to reach out and participate may be different from those who do not do so with regard to their baseline empathy, burnout, or aggression. Web-based survey research will be utilized; thus, it is impossible to verify participant eligibility and it was necessary to rely on participants' honesty about whether they meet inclusion/exclusion criteria. To mitigate this threat, demographic questions that include inclusion/exclusion criteria will be asked.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I gained IRB approval from Walden University on October 15, 2025 (IRB# 10-15-25-101332), and participant recruitment and data collection began immediately following this. Participants were required to read and indicate their approval of an

informed consent document prior to beginning the questionnaires, which informed them of the voluntary nature of the study and their ability to withdraw or stop at any time without penalty. The informed consent document also provided participants with a description of the study, as well as any known risks or benefits of participation, and their right to privacy. The data collected did not include any identifying information and will be kept secure on a computer that is password protected and can be accessed only by me. Data will be stored for a minimum of five years and then destroyed as required.

### **Summary**

This study used a quantitative, correlational, nonexperimental survey design to explore the relationship between symptoms of burnout (IV), empathy (IV), and aggression (DV) among correctional officers. The target population for this study was uniformed correctional officers working in jails or prisons in the United States. There were no other demographic exclusion criteria aside from being employed as a uniformed correctional officer in a jail or prison in the United States. Questionnaires were delivered via a web-based platform, and recruitment was performed by advertising the study with a flyer on social media. The instruments selected for this study were described, and reliability and validity were established. Linear regression analysis was used to analyze the data. Threats to validity and ethical considerations were also identified and steps were taken to mitigate the concerns.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between burnout, empathy, and aggression among uniformed correctional staff. Burnout and empathy were IVs, and aggression was the DV. Linear regressions were conducted to examine the nature of the relationships between each IV and the DV, as well as the nature of the relationship between both IVs together and the DV.

The previous chapter addressed the methodology and research design used to investigate the relationship between empathy, burnout, and aggression among correctional officers. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the statistical analyses conducted to answer the three research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of burnout and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

$H_01$ : There is no relationship between burnout and aggression.

$H_a1$ : There is a relationship between burnout and aggression.

RQ2: What is the relationship between uniformed correctional staff's levels of empathy and their levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

$H_02$ : There is no relationship between correctional staff's empathy and aggression.

$H_a2$ : There is a relationship between correctional staff's empathy and aggression.

RQ3: How do empathy and burnout together affect correctional staff's levels of aggression toward the population they serve?

$H_{03}$ : Empathy and burnout together have no effect on correctional staff's levels of aggression.

$H_{a3}$ : Empathy and burnout together have an effect on correctional staff's levels of aggression.

## **Data Collection**

### **Time Frame and Recruitment**

I gained IRB approval from Walden University on October 15, 2025. Data collection occurred between October 2025 and November 2025. A flyer was posted on social media sites, including Facebook and LinkedIn, requesting any willing and interested uniformed correctional staff currently employed at jails or prisons to complete a brief, anonymous questionnaire about the mental health of correctional staff. A link to the questionnaire on Survey Monkey was provided on the flyer.

A G\*Power calculation indicated that at least 40 participants should be included in the study. Over the 6 weeks that the survey was live, 90 participants responded to the questionnaires. However, 32 of those questionnaires were incomplete and therefore excluded from the study. A total of 58 participants produced complete questionnaires. Feedback was provided by some correctional staff expressing distaste for the language used in certain measures (e.g., referring to incarcerated individuals or inmates as “recipients”) and participants’ subsequent refusal to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

## Demographic and Descriptive Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics. The most frequently observed gender was male ( $n = 40$ , 69%), followed by female ( $n = 16$ , 27.6%) and nonbinary ( $n = 2$ , 3.4%). Regarding tenure, most participants reported being employed 1-5 years ( $n = 19$ , 32.8%), followed by >10 years ( $n = 18$ , 31%), 6-10 years ( $n = 17$ , 29.3%), and <1 year ( $n = 4$ , 6.9%). All participants were over the age of 18 years, with the youngest participant being 19 years old and the oldest being 63 years old. The mean age was 35 years, with a standard deviation of 9.39 years. The majority of participants reported working in special management ( $n = 40$ , 69%) and the vast majority reported that their employers offered them access to mental health services ( $n = 52$ , 89.7%).

**Table 1**

### *Sample Demographic Characteristics*

| Variable           | Category   | Number | Percentage |
|--------------------|------------|--------|------------|
| Gender             | Male       | 40     | 69%        |
|                    | Female     | 16     | 27.6%      |
|                    | Nonbinary  | 2      | 3.4%       |
| Tenure             | <1 year    | 4      | 6.9%       |
|                    | 1–5 years  | 19     | 32.8%      |
|                    | 6–10 years | 17     | 29.3%      |
|                    | >10 years  | 18     | 31%        |
| Special management | Yes        | 40     | 69%        |
|                    | No         | 18     | 31%        |
| MH access          | Yes        | 52     | 89.7%      |
|                    | No         | 6      | 10.3%      |
| Age                | 19–25      | 5      | 8.5%       |
|                    | 26–32      | 19     | 32.7%      |
|                    | 33–39      | 20     | 34.3%      |
|                    | 40–46      | 6      | 10.2%      |
|                    | 47–53      | 6      | 10.2%      |
|                    | 54–60      | 1      | 1.7%       |
|                    | 61–63      | 1      | 1.7%       |

## **Representation of Population**

According to the United States Census Bureau data, in 2023, the workforce of correctional officers and jailors was 361,332 people. Of the workforce in 2023, 28.3% were women and 71.7% were men. The average age of male and female correctional officers and jailors in the workforce was 40.1 years. The age range that concentrated the largest workforce of correctional officers and jailors was 30-34 years (51,277 people), 25-29 years (49,624 people), and 35 to 39 years (47,215 people), concentrating 41% of the total workforce. Based upon this data, it is believed that the sample collected for this study closely reflects the gender and age distribution present in the overall population.

## **Summary Statistics**

Table 2 presents the summary statistics for the study variables. The observations for burnout had a mean of 80.47 ( $SD = 13.98$ ,  $SE = 1.84$ ,  $Min = 42$ ,  $Max = 108$ ,  $Skewness = -.188$ ,  $Kurtosis = .275$ ). The observation for empathy had a mean of 48.22 ( $SD = 15.13$ ,  $SE = 1.99$ ,  $Min = 17$ ,  $Max = 79$ ,  $Skewness = -.200$ ,  $Kurtosis = -.795$ ). The observation for aggression had a mean of 29.17 ( $SD = 11.68$ ,  $SE = 1.53$ ,  $Min = 12$ ,  $Max = 60$ ,  $Skewness = .843$ ,  $Kurtosis = .231$ ).

**Table 2***Summary Statistics for Study Variables*

| Variable   | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>SE</i> | Min | Max | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----|-----|----------|----------|
| Burnout    | 80.47    | 13.98     | 58       | 1.84      | 42  | 108 | -.188    | .275     |
| Empathy    | 48.22    | 15.13     | 58       | 1.99      | 17  | 79  | -.200    | -.795    |
| Aggression | 29.17    | 11.68     | 58       | 1.53      | 12  | 60  | .843     | .231     |

**Results****Research Question 1**

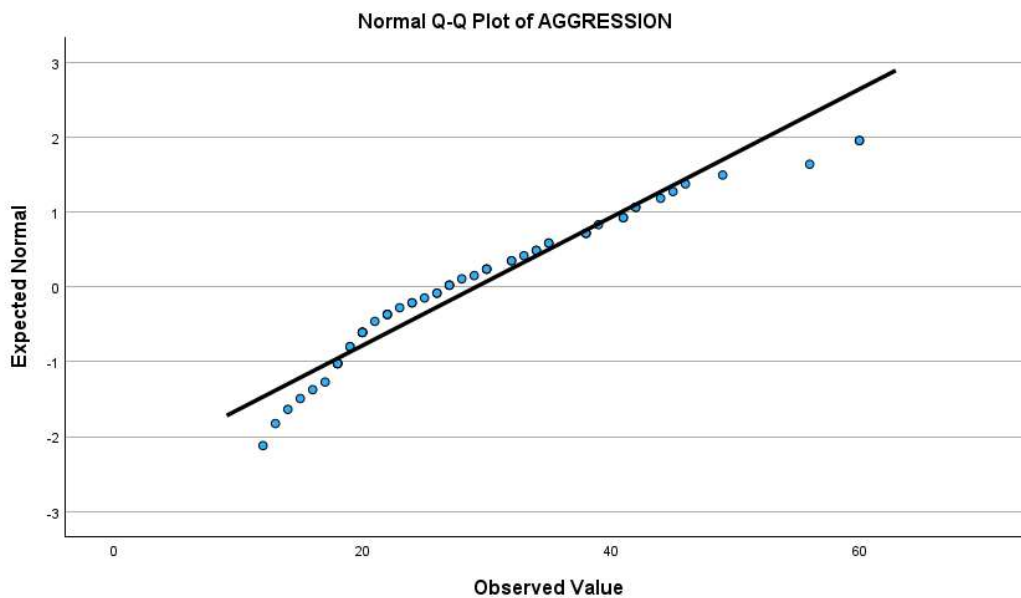
I conducted a linear regression analysis to assess the relationship between burnout (IV) and aggression (DV) to determine if burnout significantly predicted aggression.

***Assumptions***

**Normality.** I assessed the assumption of normality by way of a Q-Q scatterplot. Residual quantiles must not strongly deviate from theoretical quantiles in order for the assumption of normality to be met. Figure 1 presents the Q-Q scatterplot of model residuals. There was no marked deviation from the diagonal, suggesting that the assumption of normality was met.

**Figure 1**

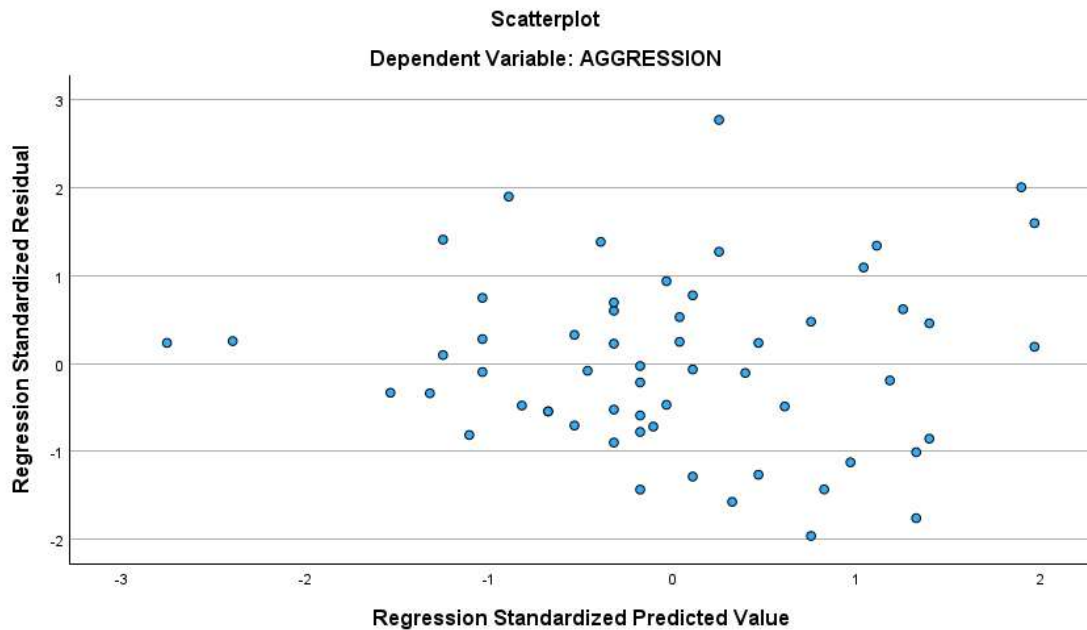
*Q-Q Scatterplot of Residuals for Regression Predicting Aggression*



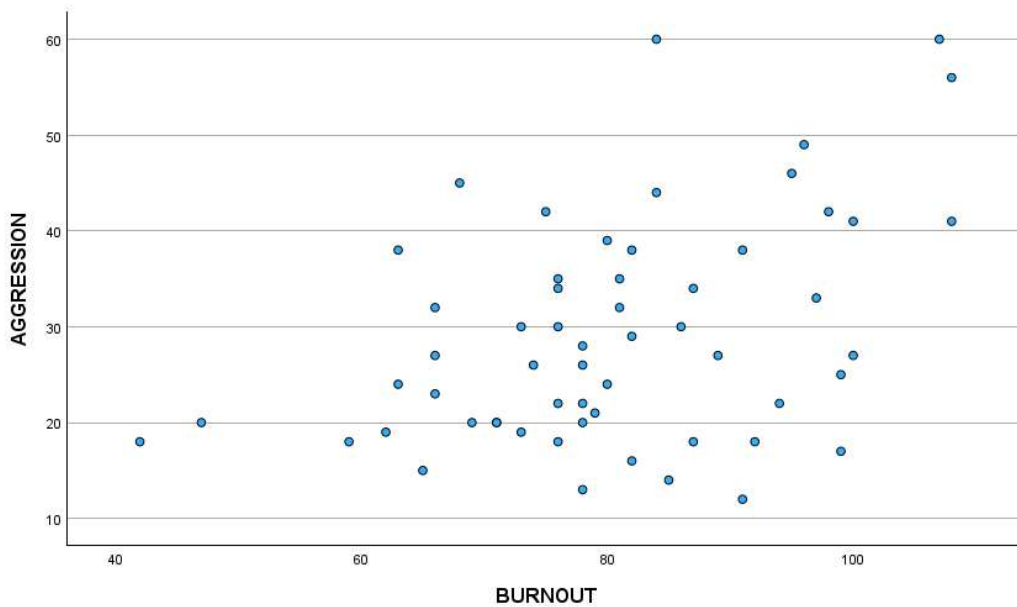
**Homoscedasticity.** I evaluated homoscedasticity by plotting the residuals against the predicted values (see Figure 2). The assumption of homoscedasticity holds when the points appear randomly distributed. The plot demonstrated a random pattern, indicating that the data met the homoscedasticity assumption.

**Figure 2**

*Scatterplot of Residuals and Fitted Values for Regression Predicting Aggression*



**Linearity.** Linearity was assessed by examining a scatterplot of the variables (see Figure 3). A plot with no curvilinear trends indicates that the assumption is met. The scatterplot did not demonstrate any curvilinear trends in the data, which suggests that the data met the linearity assumption.

**Figure 3***Scatterplot of Burnout and Aggression***Results**

The linear regression model results for Research Question 1 were significant,  $F(1,56) = 12.382, p < .001, R^2 = .18$ , indicating burnout predicts about 18% of the variance in aggression. Burnout significantly predicted aggression,  $B = .36, t(56) = 3.52, p = < .001$ . This indicates that, on average, a 1-unit increase in burnout will increase aggression values by .36 units. The standardized regression coefficient (Beta) for burnout was .43, indicating a moderately strong effect size. Through this analysis, I rejected the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). Table 3 summarizes the results of the regression model.

**Table 3***Results for Linear Regression With Burnout Predicting Aggression*

| Variable    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | 95% CI          | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|---------|----------|----------|
| (Intercept) | .56      | 8.25      | [-15.96, 17.09] | 0.00    | .07      | .95      |
| Burnout     | .36      | .10       | [.15, .56]      | .43     | 3.52     | <.001    |

*Note.* Results:  $F(1,56) = 12.382, p < .001, R^2 = .18$

A multivariate regression was conducted, using the individual subscales of aggression (verbal aggression, physical aggression, hostility, and anger) to better understand the relationship between burnout and aggression. Results suggested that that burnout significantly predicted verbal aggression,  $F(1, 56) = 7.51, p = .008, R^2 = .12.$ , as well as physical aggression,  $F(1, 56) = 6.83, p = .012, R^2 = .11$ . This suggests that burnout accounted for about 12% of the variance in verbal aggression and 11% of the variance in physical aggression. Burnout was also a strong predictor of anger,  $F(1, 56) = 13.63, p < .001, R^2 = .20$  and hostility,  $F(1, 56) = 5.84, p = .019, R^2 = .09$ , accounting for 20% of the variance in anger and 9% of the variance in hostility. Table 4 summarizes the results of this multivariate analysis.

**Table 4***Univariate Tests of Burnout Predicting Four Facets of Aggression*

| Variable            | $F(1,56)$ | $p$  | $R^2$ |
|---------------------|-----------|------|-------|
| Verbal aggression   | 7.51      | .008 | .118  |
| Physical aggression | 6.83      | .012 | .109  |
| Anger               | 13.60     | .001 | .196  |
| Hostility           | 5.84      | .019 | .094  |

**Research Question 2**

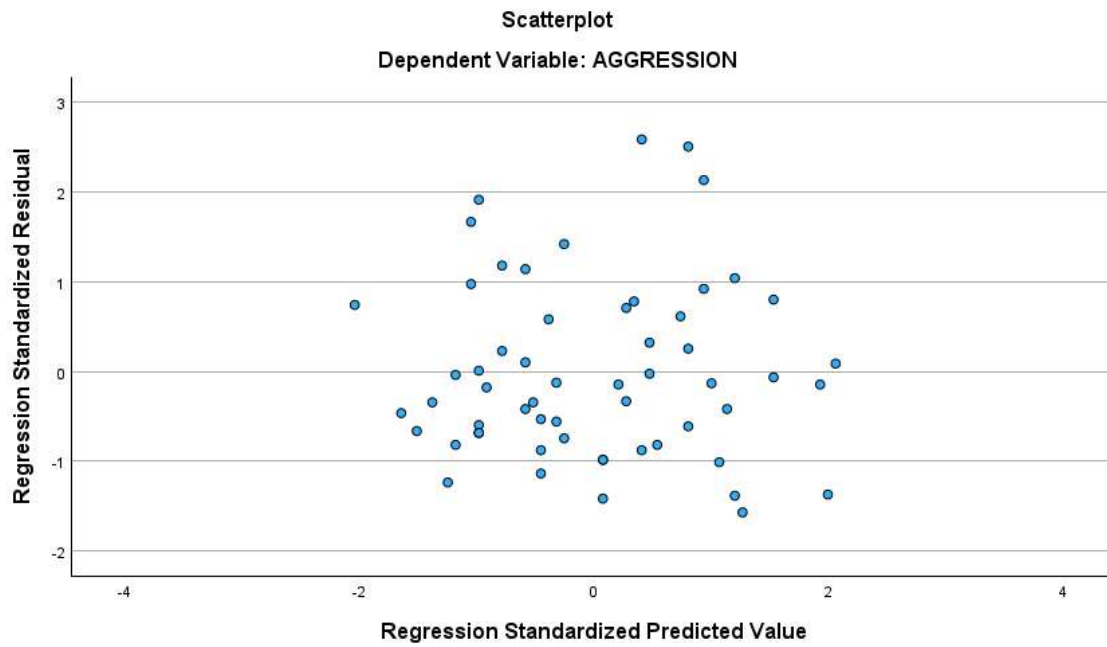
I conducted a linear regression analysis to assess the relationship between empathy (IV) and aggression (DV) and determine if empathy significantly predicted aggression.

***Assumptions***

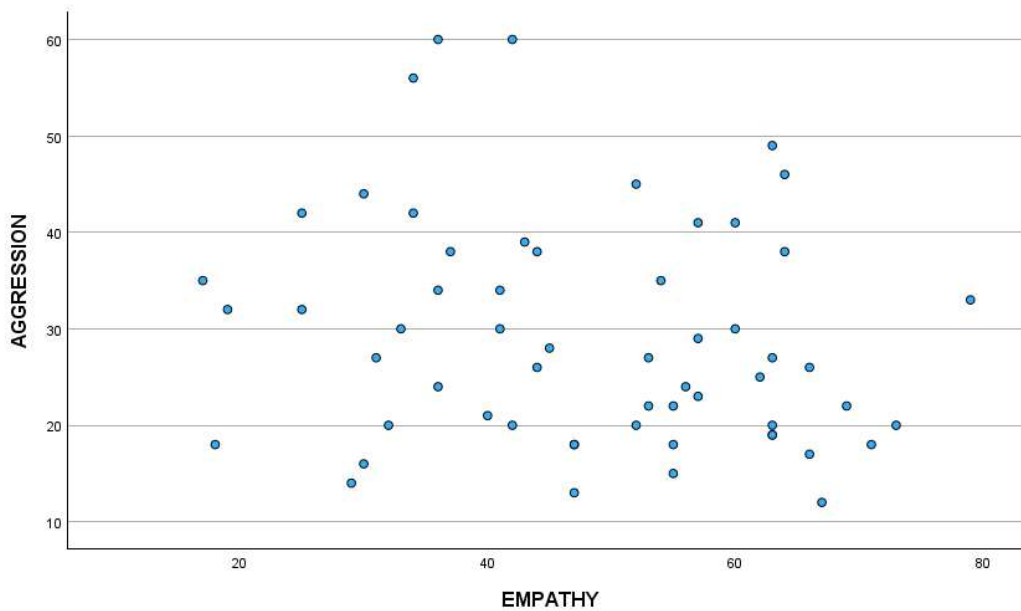
**Homoscedasticity.** I evaluated homoscedasticity by plotting the residuals against the predicted values (see Figure 4). The assumption of homoscedasticity holds when the points appear randomly distributed. The plot demonstrated a random pattern, indicating that the data met the homoscedasticity assumption.

**Figure 4**

*Scatterplot of Residuals and Fitted Values for Regression Predicting Aggression*



**Linearity.** Linearity was assessed by examining a scatterplot of the variables (see Figure 5). A plot with no curvilinear trends indicates that the assumption is met. The scatterplot did not demonstrate any curvilinear trends in the data, which suggests that the data met the linearity assumption.

**Figure 5***Scatterplot of Empathy and Aggression***Results**

The results of the linear regression model for Research Question 2 were not significant,  $F(1,56) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .133$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ , indicating that approximately 4% of variance in aggression is explained by empathy. Empathy did not significantly predict aggression scores,  $B = -.15$ ,  $t(56) = -1.52$ ,  $p = .133$ . On average, a 1-unit increase in empathy decreased the value of aggression by .15 units. The standardized regression coefficient for empathy was  $-.20$ , indicating a smaller effect size. This analysis did not reject the null hypothesis ( $H02$ ). Table 5 provides a summary of the results of the regression model.

**Table 5***Results for Linear Regression With Empathy Predicting Aggression*

| Variable    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | 95% CI         | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------|----------|-----------|----------------|---------|----------|----------|
| (Intercept) | 36.60    | 5.11      | [26.37, 46.83] | 0.00    | 7.17     | <.001    |
| Empathy     | -.15     | .10       | [-.36, .05]    | -.20    | -1.52    | .133     |

*Note.* Results:  $F(1,56) = 2.32, p = .133, R^2 = .04$

**Research Question 3**

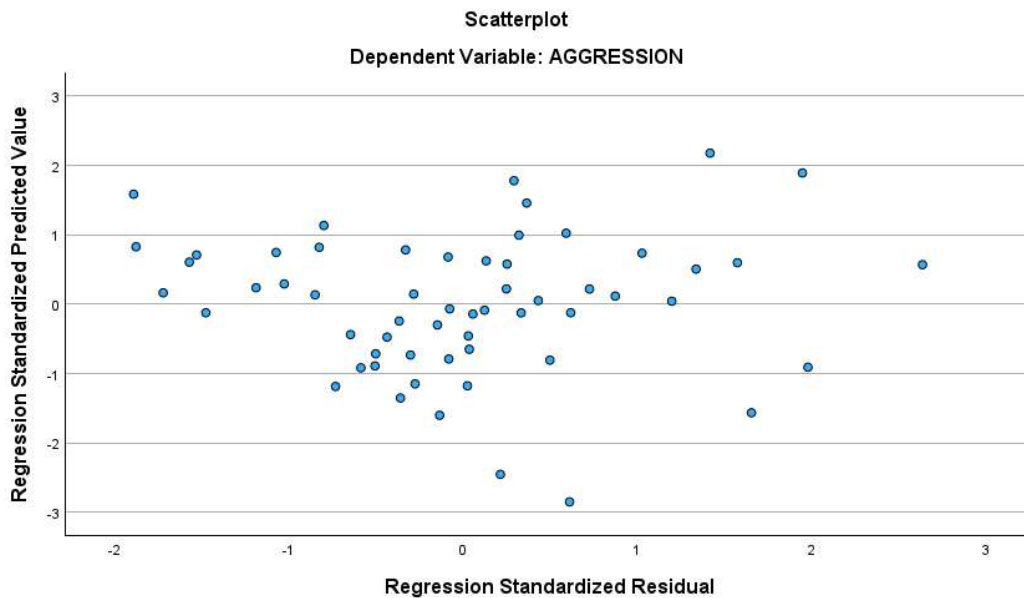
I conducted a linear regression analysis to determine if empathy (IV) and burnout (IV) together significantly predict aggression (DV).

***Assumptions***

**Homoscedasticity.** I evaluated homoscedasticity by plotting the residuals against the predicted values (Figure 6). The assumption of homoscedasticity holds when the points appear randomly distributed. The plot demonstrated a random pattern, indicating that the data met the homoscedasticity assumption. This scatterplot also confirmed the assumption of linearity.

**Figure 6**

*Scatterplot of Residuals and Fitted Values for Regression Predicting Aggression*



### ***Results***

The results of the linear regression model for Research Question 3 were significant,  $F(2,55) = 7.74$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .19$ , indicating that approximately 19% of variance in aggression is explained by empathy and burnout together. In this model, burnout significantly predicts aggression scores,  $B = .35$ ,  $t(55) = 3.56$ ,  $p = <.001$ . This means, that for every 1-unit increase in burnout, aggression increases by .35 units, holding empathy constant. Empathy did not significantly predict aggression scores,  $B = -.15$ ,  $t(55) = -1.65$ ,  $p = .105$ . On average, a 1-unit increase in empathy decreased the value of aggression by .15 units. This analysis rejected the null hypothesis ( $H03$ ). Table 6 summarizes the results of the regression analysis.

**Table 6***Results for Linear Regression With Empathy and Burnout Predicting Aggression*

| Variable    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | 95% CI          | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|---------|----------|----------|
| (Intercept) | 7.97     | 9.29      | [-10.64, 26.59] | 0.00    | .86      | .394     |
| Empathy     | -.15     | .10       | [-.34, .03]     | -.20    | -1.65    | .12      |
| Burnout     | .35      | .09       | [.16, .55]      | .42     | 3.56     | <.001    |

*Note.* Results:  $F(F(2,55) = 7.74, p = .001, R^2 = .19$

### Summary

The results of the first linear regression were significant, indicating that burnout significantly predicted aggression among this sample. Further, multivariate analysis indicated that burnout significantly predicted all four facets of aggression (verbal aggression, physical aggression, hostility, and anger). The results of the linear regression between empathy and aggression were not significant, indicating that there is not a significant predictive relationship between empathy and aggression. However, the results did trend negatively, suggesting that higher empathy did result in aggression trending down. The linear regression utilizing both independent variables was significant, indicating that burnout and empathy together did significantly predict aggression. However, empathy was still not a significant predictor of aggression in this model. In the following chapter, I address the limitations of this study, including recommendations for how future studies may address these limitations or explore variables further, and discuss the implications these findings may have for social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the predictive relationship between burnout, empathy, and aggression among uniformed correctional staff. I aimed to address a gap in research regarding the phenomenon of burnout and its impact on aggression among uniformed correctional staff. GST (Agnew, 2007) served as the theoretical framework for this study to better understand the effects persistent occupational strain may have on the attitudes and mental health of correctional officers. I utilized Maslach's Burnout Inventory, the IRI, and the Aggression Questionnaire-Short Form to measure burnout, empathy, and aggression levels of correctional officers in this sample. The results suggested a significant predictive relationship between burnout and all facets of aggression, as well as a significant predictive relationship between aggression and burnout and empathy together. The results in this study revealed not only the prevalence of burnout symptoms among correctional officers but also the impact that burnout can have on all facets of aggression. This highlights the importance of ensuring correctional officers have easy access to mental health resources and that their voices are heard when it comes to aspects of their job that can be improved to reduce their feelings of burnout.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between burnout, empathy, and aggression in a sample of uniformed correctional officers through the lens of GST (Agnew, 2007). Overall, the findings align with GST, as well as with prior empirical research examining occupational strain, emotional depletion, and maladaptive behavioral outcomes within correctional and other forensic populations. In the first

research question, I examined the relationship between burnout and aggression. Results indicated that burnout was a significant positive predictor of aggression among correctional officers. Officers who reported higher levels of burnout also reported higher overall aggression scores, accounting for a meaningful proportion of variance in aggression. These findings are consistent with GST, which posits that chronic exposure to strain, particularly strain that is persistent in nature, perceived as unjust or difficult to escape, can result in negative emotional states such as anger and frustration, which increase the likelihood of aggressive or deviant responses (Agnew, 2007). Agnew (2007) theorized that these aggressive or deviant responses manifest as a corrective response to persistent stress when individuals lack the emotional resources to cope in a more acceptable way. Knowing that burnout symptoms manifest as a depletion of emotional resources suggests that aggression may function as one corrective response among correctional officers who are experiencing significant burnout.

These results are consistent with prior research that found correlations between variables such as chronic occupational stress and self-reported aggression and intimate partner violence (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011) and associations between burnout and trait anger (Senol-Durak et al., 2021). Although prior studies often examined forensic populations similar to correctional officers, such as law enforcement, when exploring the relationship between burnout, stress, and aggression, the current study extends this literature by demonstrating a direct relationship between burnout and aggression within a correctional officer sample.

Additional analyses revealed that burnout significantly predicted all four facets of aggression, verbal aggression, physical aggression, anger, and hostility. This pattern further aligns with GST, which emphasizes that strain-related emotional exhaustion and frustration can generalize across multiple forms of aggressive expression rather than manifesting in a single behavioral domain (Agnew, 2007). These findings suggest that burnout may contribute not only to overt behavioral aggression but also to internalized hostility and affective dysregulation, which may increase the risk of use-of-force incidents or antagonistic interactions within correctional settings.

In the second research question, the relationship between empathy and burnout was investigated. The results indicate that empathy did not significantly predict aggression, although the observed relationship did trend in a negative direction. Officers with higher empathy scores tended to report lower aggression. However, this association did not reach statistical significance. As such, the null hypothesis for the second research question was not rejected. This finding diverges somewhat from theoretical expectations and prior research suggesting that diminished empathy may increase aggressive behavior (Mivshek & Schriver, 2023; Trauernicht et al., 2021). One possible explanation is that empathy alone may not be sufficient to buffer against aggression when officers are experiencing high levels of occupational strain and emotional exhaustion. From a GST perspective, the protective influence of empathy may be overridden when strain is severe, chronic, or embedded within a broader institutional culture that normalizes emotional distancing and aggression as coping mechanisms (Higgins et al., 2021). Additionally, empathy may be contextually constrained within correctional environments. Prior

qualitative and quantitative research suggests that correctional officers often adopt emotional detachment or depersonalization as adaptive strategies for managing constant exposure to threat and trauma (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Mears et al., 2022). In such environments, empathy may be selectively suppressed or compartmentalized, reducing its observable impact on aggression-related outcomes. It should also be noted that the effect size for empathy was small, which may have resulted in a significant relationship between variables not being picked up by analyses. The findings in this research highlight the importance of continuing the conversation about the culture present in correctional facilities and how it may play a role in the willful avoidance of talking about or processing one's distress.

In the third research question, the relationship between burnout and empathy together on aggression was explored. Results indicated that the combined model significantly predicted aggression. However, burnout remained the only significant, unique predictor when controlling for empathy. These findings support the rejection of the null hypothesis. This pattern aligns closely with General Strain Theory, which emphasizes the impacts of strain and emotional depletion in precipitating maladaptive behavioral responses. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization may erode cognitive and emotional resources necessary for empathy to effectively regulate behavior (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Trauernicht et al., 2021).

These results expand upon existing GST-based research by demonstrating that burnout, a construct closely linked to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, serves

as a meaningful predictor of aggression within a correctional population. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing body of literature emphasizing the need to address structural and organizational sources of strain in order to reduce maladaptive outcomes such as aggression and excessive use of force.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Some limitations of this study include the use of convenience sampling, which is not entirely random, and thus, may result in a sample that deviates in some ways from what would be representative of the population under study. For example, it is possible that correctional officers who were willing to participate in the study may have had higher baseline levels of aggression or may have been experiencing high levels of burnout. Self-report measures were also utilized in this study, meaning that the participants could have under- or over-reported their levels of empathy, burnout, and aggression. This study also relied on participants' honesty with regard to their demographics and whether they were currently employed as uniformed correctional staff. While my findings serve as a solid foundation for future research, it is important to bear in mind these limitations when interpreting the findings.

### **Recommendations**

I have several recommendations for future research based on the limitations and findings of my own study. First, future studies would benefit from utilizing a mixed-method approach to include interviews with uniformed correctional staff. During my data collection phase, I received feedback from multiple correctional officers who reported frustration about the language used in the Maslach Burnout Inventory that refers to the

population they serve as “recipients”, expressing that they believed this language minimized the crimes inmates were incarcerated for. Some correctional officers also expressed concern that the aggression questionnaire may paint them to be more aggressive than they are. An interview portion to this study could have provided more insight into these concerns and added more depth to their answers. Second, expanding the scope of this study to include administrative staff and healthcare professionals could allow for a comparison of how burnout impacts correctional employees in different roles. Third, this study included a demographic question asking whether or not their employers provided access to mental health treatment. The vast majority of respondents reported that they were provided access, however, future research would benefit from determining how often this resource is utilized and if it is free or affordable to them. Although most of the respondents in this study reported having access to mental health services, it is unknown whether or not any of them have ever received mental health treatment or if doing so would have changed the results in any way. Finally, the regression analysis for empathy and aggression yielded an effect size that was smaller. It is possible that a larger sample could have resulted in a significant relationship between these variables, thus it would be beneficial for future research to explore the relationship between empathy and aggression among correctional officers further.

### **Implications**

This study, and the results yielded emphasize the need to prioritize the mental health and wellness of correctional officers. By identifying burnout as a significant predictor of aggression among correctional officers, this research highlights the critical

role that organizational conditions and occupational strain play in not only the mental health, but also the behavior of correctional officers.

At the institutional level, the findings suggest that efforts to reduce aggression among correctional officers should prioritize the prevention and mitigation of burnout. Burnout reflects chronic occupational strain, including excessive workload, emotional exhaustion, lack of administrative support, and exposure to violence, all of which are consistently identified in past research as fairly common experiences of correctional officers (Fusco et al., 2021; Page & Robertson, 2021). From a social change perspective, these results underscore the need for correctional institutions to shift away from reactive, punitive responses to staff misconduct and instead adopt proactive, preventative strategies that address the structural sources of strain.

Implementing organizational reforms, such as improving staffing levels, reducing mandatory overtime, increasing access to mental health resources, and fostering supportive supervisory practices, could reduce burnout and, in turn, not only improve the quality of life of correctional officers, but also lower the risk of use of force violations. Creating work environments that prioritize psychological safety and employee well-being represents a meaningful step toward institutional cultures that place the well-being and safety of their uniformed staff at a higher priority.

The results also have implications for promoting positive social change by reframing how correctional officer wellness is understood and addressed. Rather than viewing aggression or misconduct solely as an issue of the individual, the findings support a systemic perspective that recognizes burnout as a key contributing factor. This

reframing aligns with GST and emphasizes that reducing occupational strain can lead to healthier coping strategies and more adaptive emotional regulation. By normalizing discussions of burnout and emotional exhaustion, correctional agencies may help reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. Providing confidential counseling services, peer support programs, and burnout-focused training may empower officers to access resources before strain manifests as aggression. Supporting correctional staff in this way not only benefits individual officers but also promotes a healthier workforce.

Reducing burnout among correctional officers has direct implications for the treatment and well-being of incarcerated individuals. When officers are emotionally exhausted and depersonalized, interactions with incarcerated individuals may become more adversarial, increasing the risk of verbal or physical harm. By addressing burnout at its source, institutions may foster more respectful and stable interactions between staff and incarcerated individuals. Such changes can support incarcerated individuals' psychological well-being, reduce institutional violence, and create conditions more conducive to rehabilitation and reintegration. In this way, reducing burnout among correctional officers can contribute to broader social change by promoting fairness, dignity, and humane treatment within the justice system.

The implications of this study extend beyond correctional facilities to the broader community. Correctional officers do not operate in isolation, and the effects of occupational strain, burnout, and aggression may spill over into family relationships. Prior research has linked occupational stress in forensic professions to adverse outcomes

such as intimate partner violence (A. Anderson & Lo, 2011) suggesting that reducing burnout may have ripple effects beyond the workplace. Improving working conditions for correctional officers could also contribute to healthier family systems.

Finally, these findings have implications for policy development and training initiatives. Policies that mandate reasonable staffing ratios, limit excessive overtime, and ensure access to mental health resources may help reduce the systemic strain that contributes to burnout. Training programs that focus on stress management, emotional regulation, and trauma-informed practices may further support officers' ability to cope with occupational demands before their emotional resources and mental health is so depleted that they become more likely to exhibit aggression. For social change efforts to be effective, they must target both individual and organizational factors, with particular emphasis on reducing chronic strain within correctional environments.

### **Conclusion**

In this quantitative study, I investigated the relationships between burnout, empathy, and aggression. While results suggested that burnout was the sole statistically significant predictor of aggression, this study addressed the gap in existing research aimed at better understanding correctional officers and how burnout impacts aggression. It is known, and has been highlighted by past studies, that correctional officers are exposed to a significant amount of strain on a regular basis, including being forced to work long hours, work in understaffed facilities, and being exposed to violence (Fusco et al., 2021; Page & Robertson, 2021). However, little existing research has delved into how

this persistent strain may manifest, not only as symptoms of burnout, but also as hostility, anger, and aggression.

These results highlight the need for more attention to be paid to the experiences of correctional officers, particularly with regard to the aspects of their occupational environments that contribute to their high levels of burnout. It is also hoped that this study will underscore the need for changes to be made at institutional levels to improve the quality of life of correctional officers, resulting in a work environment that is safer, families that are healthier, and a community that prioritizes the mental health and well-being of those working in correctional facilities.

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## Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How long have you been employed as uniformed correctional staff? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you work in a special management unit (disciplinary or mental health housing)?  
\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No
5. Does your employer offer access to mental health resources?
6. \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

## Appendix B: Maslach Burnout Inventory Permission



[www.mindgarden.com](http://www.mindgarden.com)

To Whom It May Concern,

The above-named person has made a license purchase from Mind Garden, Inc. and has permission to administer the following copyrighted instrument up to that quantity purchased:

**Maslach Burnout Inventory forms: Human Services Survey, Human Services Survey for Medical Personnel, Educators Survey, General Survey, or General Survey for Students.**

The license holder has permission to administer the complete instrument in their research, however, only three sample items from this instrument as specified below may be included in the research write-up, thesis, or dissertation. Any other use must receive prior written permission from Mind Garden. The entire instrument form may not be included or reproduced at any time in any other published material. Please understand that disclosing more than we have authorized will compromise the integrity and value of the test.

Citation of the instrument must include the applicable copyright statement listed below.

Sample Items:

**MBI - Human Services Survey - MBI-HSS:**

I feel emotionally drained from my work.  
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.  
I don't really care what happens to some recipients.

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**MBI - Human Services Survey for Medical Personnel - MBI-HSS (MP):**

I feel emotionally drained from my work.  
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.  
I don't really care what happens to some patients.

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**MBI - Educators Survey - MBI-ES:**

I feel emotionally drained from my work.  
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.  
I don't really care what happens to some students.

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**MBI - General Survey - MBI-GS:**

I feel emotionally drained from my work.  
In my opinion, I am good at my job.  
I doubt the significance of my work.

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**MBI - General Survey for Students - MBI-GS (S):**

I feel emotionally drained by my studies.  
In my opinion, I am a good student.  
I doubt the significance of my studies.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Most".

Robert Most  
Mind Garden, Inc.  
[www.mindgarden.com](http://www.mindgarden.com)

## Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

I am conducting a research study focused on improving our understanding of uniformed correctional staff and how their work environment affects their mental health and wellness.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please follow the link provided below to complete a brief, web-based questionnaire about your experiences working in a correctional setting. No identifying information will be collected, and your answers will remain 100% anonymous.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/W9RTF6Q>



### About the study:

The web-based questionnaire takes approximately 20 minutes to complete and is completely anonymous.

The published study will not share any names or details that may identify you, as these details will not be provided during your participation in this study.

### Volunteers must meet these requirements:

18 years of age or older

Currently employed as uniformed correctional staff in a jail or prison

This study is part of the doctoral study for Sagan Ladd, a PhD student at Walden University